WHAT IS CLAIMED IS:

1. A method for assisting a user in selecting one or more items from an item set that best match a set of target preferences, the method comprising:

obtaining information from the user about that user's set of target preferences, using direct questions;

generating at least one list of items selected from the item set that will best meet the set of target preferences based on the information provided; and

generating a display including the list of items and explanations for at least one item on the list of items explaining how well attributes of the at least one item match the set of target preferences.

2. The method of claim 1, wherein the item is a product, service or other selectable element.

3. The method of claim 1, wherein the information obtained from questions to the user is supplemented with other information about the user.

4. The method of claim 3, wherein the other information includes one or more of information provided by the user during online interactions and information provided by the user during offline interactions.

5. The method of claim 4, wherein the information provided by the user is one or more of registration information, information about prior selections, information about prior purchases and information about prior interactions with automated decision advisors.

6. The method of claim 1, further comprising a step of providing the user with explanations of recommendations, where each explanation contains at least one pro or at least one con, and the explanation refers to an attribute of the item and identifies how well the attribute meets the user's set of target preferences.

7. The method of claim 6, wherein one or more pro or con includes a reference to the set of target preferences.

8. The method of 6, further comprising generating a statement relating one or more pro or con to a matching of an attribute and a recommendation for or against an item based on indirect inferences from user inputs.

9. The method of claim 8, wherein each explanation includes those pros and cons that have high estimated decision relevance to the user, and excludes at least one mention of a low estimated relevance attribute.

10. The method of claim 9, further comprising a step of estimating decision relevance of an attribute to the user as an increasing function of estimated importance of the attribute to the user and an absolute relative preference value, wherein the absolute relative preference value of a given item is a measure of a difference between an attribute value for the given item and an average value of the attribute for items in the list of items other than the given item.

11. The method of claim 1, further comprising generating for display to the user a list of common attributes for which all of the items on the list of items have common values.

12. The method of claim 11, wherein the list of common attributes includes attributes that have values in a common range.

13. The method of claim 11, wherein the list of common attributes includes pros and cons for attributes that have high estimated importance to the user and excludes at least one pro or con for at least one attribute that has a low estimated importance to the user.

14. The method of claim 13, wherein one or more pro or con includes a reference to the set of target preferences.

15. The method of 11, further comprising generating a statement relating one or more pro or con to a matching of an attribute and a recommendation for or against an item based on indirect inferences from user inputs.

16. The method of claim 1, further comprising offering questions to the user in a sequence that is determined dynamically based on answers to previous questions.

17. The method of claim 16, wherein sequence of questions, is based on a priority calculated as an increasing function of the uncertainty about the importance of the attributes to which the question pertains and the variation in attribute values among the items.

18. The method of claim 17, wherein the variation of attribute value among the items is weighted to the values of the items with the high current ranking so that the question priority reflects the expectation that answers to the question are likely to change the ranking of the top ranked items.

19. The method of claim 18, wherein the system mentions for each unmet requirements and selected combinations of requirements the number of items it or they eliminate as unacceptable.

20. The method of claim 1, wherein if no item meets all requirements specified by the user, the system displays a conflict page that mentions the fact that no items meet all requirements and lists the requirements that cannot be simultaneously met.